

## CBS Replies to Editorial on Pentagon Documentary

This letter is in response to your editorial of March 26, in which you start by calling the CBS News documentary, "The Selling of the Pentagon," a "highly valuable and informative exposition of a subject about which the American people should know more," and then proceed to examine in some detail the specific editing of that film and general practices of television news editing technique.

The editorial was obviously written by one who has long labored on the editorial page—and not on the news pages.

You conclude that in some measure (not specified) public confidence and credibility are undermined by our editing techniques "innocent or not."

The question of how a news or documentary broadcast is edited is at least as important as you obviously consider it. It is precisely as important as, and possibly no more complicated than, questions pertaining to editing in the print medium (newspapers and news magazines)—the process by which any journalist rejects or accepts, selects and omits, and almost always compresses material available to him. You do not question the right, indeed the professional obligation of your reporters to do this, nor of your editors to continue the process once the reporter has done his job, nor indeed, of your senior editors to impose their professional judgment upon this same piece of work when or if it comes to them.

But you question not only our right to do the same thing, but also the methods by which we edit, and even our motives ("innocent or not"). You do not, in other words, grant us the right to do precisely what you do—and must do if you are journalists as distinguished from transmission belts.

Why?

The key to why you feel this way is spelled out in your editorial: "People who work in the nonelectronic news business know how readily they themselves may dis-

tort an event or a remark . . . these dangers are of course multiplied in the production of a televised documentary."

You are saying that good reporting—fair reporting—is a difficult business, with many pitfalls along the way, that television reporting is a more difficult business with more pitfalls. Fair enough.

Then you go on to suggest, indeed recommend, that our rules should be different than your rules, that sound journalistic ethics and the First Amendment are somehow divisible between rights granted to journalists whose work comes out in ink and somewhat lesser rights for journalists whose work comes out electronically. You say we should go out of our way to "preserve intact and in sequence" the response of those we interview. We both "go out of our way" to be fair and accurate, but we both have limitations of space, and we both seek clarity. Except in verbatim transcripts, neither medium preserves intact or in sequence everything it presents. You say at the very least we should indicate that something in the interview has been dropped. If we asked you to do this, you would properly respond that readers know, without a blizzard of asterisks, that material in your paper is edited, that these are not the complete remarks. Our viewers know it, too. And so do those whom we cover.

But most astonishing of all, you propose that we should give the subject of the interview an opportunity to see and approve his revised remarks. Is that now the policy at The Washington Post? Of course not. You know and I know that this strikes at the very core of independent and free journalism. To grant a subject such a right of review is to remove the basic journalistic function of editing from the hands of the journalist and place it—in the case of the documentary in question—in the hands of the Pentagon. I almost wrote—"tell you what, we'll do it if you'll do it." Then I had a sec-

ond thought: No, we won't do it even if you should do it.

We are all after the same thing: to be fair, to inform the public fairly and honestly. We do not suggest that we—or any journalistic organization—are free from errors, but nothing in the First Amendment suggests that we must be perfect, or that we are not human. And nothing suggests that if our responsibility is larger, our job tougher or our coverage broader there should be some new set of rules for our kind of journalism, as if to say the First Amendment is fine so long as it doesn't count for much. You don't seem to mind if our end of the dinghy sinks, so long as yours stays afloat.

Fairness is at the root of all this, and fairness can be and always will be debated.

But I submit that we are as careful about editing, as concerned with what is fair and proper and in balance, as rigorous in our internal screening and editorial control processes as any journalistic organization.

The job of ensuring that fairness, that balance and that sense of responsibility is difficult. It is the subject of our constant review and concern. It is not a question that can be solved by a single statement of policy or staff memorandum. It must be, and it is, the daily concern of our working reporters, editors and management.

We believe, as I have said publicly before, that "The Selling of the Pentagon" was edited fairly and honestly. Long after the useful and valuable debate on this broadcast has subsided and perhaps been forgotten we shall be editing other news broadcasts and other documentaries as fairly and as honestly as we know how, and in accordance with established journalistic practice—just as you shall be so editing.

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See today's editorial, "Mr. Salant's Letter."